

Loss and damage from climate change: Impacts on the human rights of Moroccan nomads

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Submission to OHCHR – January 2024

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I. Context

Nomadic communities around the world are facing the deleterious impact of climate change, and a case in point is the nomadic tribes of southeastern Morocco. Their way of life is essentially based on livestock breeding, mainly sheep and goats, and they engage in migratory patterns in search of suitable pastures as the seasons change. However, according to the testimonies collected by IMAL, suitable routes for their migratory patterns are dying out, due to widespread desiccation and increasingly frequent protracted droughts leaving pastures and water sources desperately lacking. Under such circumstances, many families find themselves forced to give up their livestock and relocate to nearby villages or towns. Giving up their way of life and culture is a most difficult decision, from a socio-cultural and economic standpoint.

It is in this context that the present submission focuses on loss and damage from the adverse effects of climate change on the full enjoyment of human rights among the nomads in Morocco. Three categories of human rights impacts, recognized by international human rights law, are identified here: (i) access to water, (ii) access to education and (iii) protection of cultural heritage. These categories of impacts are all linked to the increasing water shortages and persistent droughts in the mountains of southeastern Morocco in recent years. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report, such trends are consistent with scientific understanding of global anthropogenic climate change impacts in the north-west Africa region. Climate change to date has been mostly caused by the cumulative emissions of high-income industrialized countries — essentially, the Annex II Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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As this submission shows, the impacts of climate change have negatively affected the availability of water and the traditional movement of nomadic families, and this in turn is affecting children's access to education and contributes to the extinction of the nomadic lifestyle, resulting in cultural loss.

II. The effects of climate change on access to water

In the heart of the southeastern Moroccan Atlas mountains, the nomads of the "Ait Aissa Izm" tribes are living a harsh reality in the face of the devastating effects of climate change on their access to water, for which access is a fundamental right recognized by international human rights law. It is noteworthy to observe that, at the time of this study in 2024, with almost no water sources remaining in the traditional areas, there are fewer nomads in the mountains than before. Only one water point remains on the traditional nomadic route, which is the result of an initiative financed by the Office Régional de Mise en Valeur Agricole de Ouarzazate (ORMVAO), aimed at facilitating nomads' access to this crucial resource. Regarding the circumstances today, *"this situation is unprecedented,"* states a 91-year-old nomad. He continues, *"we are now in the eighth consecutive year of drought. In the past, access to water was facilitated by frequent rainfall, but in recent years, drought seasons have followed one another."*

During the interviews, the term "Aman" (water in Tamazight) resonates like a cry of despair, recorded 49 times by interviewers. The communities' main concerns revolve around water. On this matter, another nomad states, *"Water is everything. It's the most important thing for us. We can buy food and feed the cattle with what's left in the mountains, but water can't be bought. It is priceless."* In this sense, water has become a scarce commodity due to adverse impacts of climate change.

The story begins with the nomadic women, the pillars of these communities, who travel miles every day in search of water. The women, who are responsible for collecting water, bear the brunt of this increasing difficulty, being forced to make considerably longer journeys in search of water points.

The nomads' traditional transhumance routes are mainly disrupted by the lack of water. In the past, the year would be structured around a well-defined travel schedule: the summer months were devoted to Agdal - Imilchil, while the winter months were spent on the Errachidia side, with a return to Assoul and the surrounding area when the cold set in. Today, this traditional route no longer exists. Nomads go where little water exists, to preserve their livelihoods and the lives of their livestock.

The scarcity of water is forcing some nomads to incur debts to feed their livestock, their main source of income. One young nomadic woman recounts that they have just bought 20 bags of fodder, each costing 240 Moroccan dirhams, financed largely by debt. Nomads also have to bear the cost of transport, for which they pay 15 Moroccan dirhams more per bag in addition to the original primary price of fodder. The husband confirms his wife's claims, pointing out that some individuals have accumulated debts of over 30,000 Moroccan dirhams since October, in the context of drought.

A major project to develop and equip a water-point has been financed by the state's ORMVAO. The nomads interviewed welcome this project and express their hope that others will follow. These initiatives are seen as important to guarantee the right to water and reducing displacement for women and girls. Such Moroccan government initiatives are positive but require greater support to guarantee the right to adequate and equitable enjoyment of water, particularly within the framework of responsibility of developed countries to provide climate finance under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

III. The effects of climate change on access to education

In Morocco, encouraging steps were taken in 2017 with the construction of a dedicated school near the rural village of Assoul for the benefit of nomads. Many nomads settle next to the school with their children, livestock and tents, hoping to guarantee their children's right to education. However, as nomads are unable to stay in one place all year round, many children are forced to leave school to accompany their families in search of water and pasture, which are no longer available close to the school due to the losses and damages caused by climate change. Indeed, despite the efforts made by the Moroccan government, and despite Morocco not being responsible for causing the climate changes, families are forced to make choices against the enjoyment of this fundamental right.

Testimonies from members of the nomadic community highlight a heartbreaking dilemma. Parents aspire for their children to receive an education, but the nomadic lifestyle does not seem compatible with formal education. One young nomadic mother expresses this difficulty by saying, "*The child's education and the nomadic lifestyle don't fit harmoniously, because it's not possible to take the school or the teacher with us.*"

Some members of the community have tried to resolve this dilemma by opting for partial sedentarization. They have bought houses or land in nearby villages, enabling their children to attend school. However, severe droughts have exacerbated the situation. Recurrent droughts and the lack of grazing land have seriously affected the revenues of these nomadic, who depend largely on the sale of livestock in the weekly *souks* (markets). The loss of income now prevents families from making free choices..

Some nomadic families have decided to settle on a more permanent basis to guarantee access to education for their children. However, this solution has become financially challenging due to the impacts of climate disruption on their livelihoods and their economy of transhumance. Nomadic children, though innocent in the cause of climate change, are severely affected by it.

These challenges, common across nomadic communities in Africa, underline the need for international support, notably in financial terms, by the higher-income historic polluting countries, to protect the access of nomadic families to education for children as well as water.

IV. The effects of climate change on the protection of the cultural heritage

Giving up one's lifestyle means losing one's cultural heritage. Maintaining centuries-old values and traditions while moving away from nomadic lifestyles represents a significant challenge. One nomad — forced to abandon his nomadic lifestyle due to drought — points out that everything has changed from a cultural point of view. He explains: "*In the past, we used to celebrate weddings for four days with Ahidous² every day. Today, musical instruments and materials have taken over, creating music that no longer sounds like us.*"

Moreover, when it comes to dress, women and men in sedentary lifestyles no longer wear the same clothes as they used to as nomads. To make this point, the same nomad refers to a time when nomadic women wore a specific type of garment that has disappeared in settled communities. It was a garment made from wool, prepared by the women themselves. He explains: "*If a woman wears this*

² Ahidous is a traditional dance practiced by the Amazigh tribes of the Middle and High Atlas mountains. The Amazighs are indigenous to Northern Africa.

today, she is subject to mockery. If she didn't wear a jellaba, she was laughed at." This is another example of cultural losses induced by displacement forced by climate change.

One nomad and father of two young daughters tells us about recent conflicts between nomads, which have arisen due to forced displacement caused by drought. He reports that one nomad lost three of his sheep, whose throats were slit by other nomads, simply because he entered another territory. This type of incident is unprecedented, he stresses, pointing out that, before recent climate changes, such acts of violence were previously unimaginable within the nomadic way of life. Drought-intensified competition is disrupting the nomads' social fabric and impacting crucial aspects of their culture, including their strong traditions of hospitality.

V. Concluding messages and recommendations

- Loss and damage from climate change, linked to water scarcity and drought, is negatively affecting nomads' full enjoyment of several categories of human rights, notably their access to water, access to education, cultural heritage and way of life. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report confirms that this part of Africa region has experienced and will continue to experience increasing water scarcity and increasing frequency of drought.
- Climate change to date has been mostly caused by the cumulative emissions of high-income industrialized countries. Vulnerable communities who have not contributed to climate change are forced to bear a disproportionate cost. Historic polluters must recognize that their cumulative emissions have deprived vulnerable indigenous communities of their basic human rights.
- Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Annex II countries, as the historic emitters, have a responsibility to provide climate finance, via institutions such as the Adaptation Fund and the Loss and Damage Fund, which can strengthen existing efforts to respond to loss and damage in nomadic communities. Funds should be allocated as grants for the direct benefit of impacted nomadic communities.
- Swift increases in international support from high-income historic polluters, notably in climate finance, are needed now to guarantee the enjoyment of the fundamental rights of nomadic communities. If swift and adequate, such support would help mitigate the nomads' loss of access to adequate and equitable enjoyment of water, help the nomadic children in their quest for education, and help to protect the special nomadic cultural heritage.
- IMAL urges the international community to recognize the negative impacts upon nomads from climate change losses and damages as outlined, consistent with the plight of many nomads across Africa, and urges high-income historic polluters to develop inclusive policies and programs to provide climate finance to enable nomads to enjoy their rights. There is no time to tolerate inaction.

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